DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 136 821 IR 004 618

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TITLE The Future of Reference Services in the Public Library.
PUB DATE Mar 77
NOTE 19p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Information Services; *Futures (of Society); *Information Needs; Library Planning; *Library Reference Services; *Public Libraries

ABSTRACT

The public library is often regarded as serving peripheral rather than vital needs of the community. Because funding is limited, people need to be made aware of the library's potential role in society. Society has become information rich with increased white collar jobs and growth of the information segment of education, research and development, communications media, information machines and services. Information must be selected, ordered, processed, and made available to satisfy all potential public demands. Improvements in technology, networking and bibliographic structure, and the introduction of systems concepts into libraries will determine the future of reference services. To improve the quality of services, new goals and standards in information delivery must be developed and reference librarians must better anticipate user and nonuser needs. Research on information needs governed by societal trends can aid in developing reference programs. Current job, business information, information on women, on line reference retrieval, and community resource file services will expand and improve in the future to better meet user needs. (KP)

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THE FUTURE OF REFERENCE SERVICES IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

By Ivy Lerner

March 1977

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We are all familiar with the stereotyped services of the public library: the library is seen as a place for leisure reading, for "story hour," and as a storage house for books and magazines. The librarian is there to help people use the card catalog, to answer students' questions, and to provide information about hobbies. Certainly these activities do take place in the public library and they provide a valuable service. They are not, however, seen by many people as essential services. The library is often regarded as serving peripheral, rather than vital needs. In a time when funding is limited, an institution providing what is considered to be "peripheral services" may have difficulty defending its legitimacy. It is imperative that people be made aware that the public library has the potential to play a vital role in our complex society.

We are currently shifting from an industrial society to what has been called an "information society."[1] This point may be clarified by looking at the transitions that have taken place in the composition of occupational categories over the last twenty-five years.[2] In 1950, 37.5% of employed persons, 14 years and older, were white-collar workers. By 1975, 50.4% of employed persons, 16 years and older, were white-collar workers. Professional and technical workers increased from 7.5% to 15.3% of the total work force, blue-collar workers decreased from 39.1% to 32.6%, service workers increased from 10.9% to 13.6%, and farm-workers decreased from 12.4% to 3.3% in this period, 1950 to 1975.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics has made a projection of the percentage increase expected in various occupations between 1968 and 1980.[3] White-collar jobs are estimated to increase by 50%, and the number of jobs that now require an advanced degree for professional advancement are estimated to increase by 38%.

The reason for this shift may be as Edwin Parker, professor of communications at Stanford University, states, that "expenditures on information may constitute the most promising investment in improved economic productivity. Increasing productivity means producing more goods and services for the same amount of human labor. This usually means working smarter rather than working harder, i.e., applying new information to the production processes."[4] In Parker's article, "Information and Society," the role of information is further analyzed in light of a conclusion made in a 1962 publication of economist Fritz Machlup, that "the information segment of the economy is growing at the rate of approximately ten percent per year, a rate approximately double that of the economy as a whole."[5] The information segment includes education, research and development, media of communication, information machines, and information services.[6]

While this tremendous growth has resulted in our becoming an information-rich society, it has also caused serious problems. Information must be selected, ordered, processed, and made available. The operational and financial problems are severe.[7]

The public library, through reference services, is the one institution committed, at least in theory, to meeting information needs. In many areas, the library has fallen short of this goal.

Rose Phelps claimed in 1947 that "no public library, however successful, has as yet developed its reference service to the point where the potential demands of the public are fully supplied."[8] This statement remains true today. But the many changes taking place in reference services throughout the country indicates a serious intent on the part of many libraries to become a vital source of information delivery.

Technological growth has had a tremendous impact on library service. Much has been written on the uses of computers, cable television, satellites, and other technological advances. For the purposes of a discussion on the potential of reference service, technology will be seen as an evolving mechanism that has the capability to bring about needed access of information. However, it is not enough to have the means to store, analyze, and retrieve information. It is essential to devise adequate plans and programs to enable information to reach all segments of the population.

One of the major developments that will determine the future of reference and information services is the introduction of systems concepts and systems thinking into libraries.[9] A systems approach is becoming a working reality for the public library. Local, regional, and state systems, such as MIDLNET or Illinois' state system plan, are providing a vast improvement in services for the library user. There is now an ongoing trend for the implementation of a national network of information.

In 1967 President Johnson expressed the need for providing the best library facilities in the world through the exploitation of present communications technology.[10] In 1975 the National

Committee of Library and Information Sciences published Toward a National Program for Library and Information Services: Goals for Action. NCLIS proclaimed its objective as the eventual provision, to "... every individual ..." in the U.S., "equal opportunity of access to the total information resources which will satisfy the individual's educational, working, cultural, and leisure-time needs and interests regardless of the individual's location, social or physical condition or level of intellectual achievement."[11] NCLIS further states as its objectives: "1) to strengthen, develop or create where needed, human and material resources which are supportive of high quality library and information services: 2) to join together the library and information facilities in the country through a common pattern of organization, uniform standards, and shared communications, to form a nationwide network."[12]

A national system does not preclude the need for existing networks: indeed, these will serve an increasingly important role. NCLIS also encourages the growth of collections at the local level. Because of space, time, personnel, and funding limitations, however, it is impossible for the public library to have all the materials necessary to address the needs of its potential constituency. Within the framework of a network, this means that the user's needs can still be met.

In recent years there has been a tremendous improvement in the whole structure of bibliographic control,[13] including an expansion and strengthening of such traditional resources as national and trade bibliographies, journal indexes, and abstracting services.[14] Dictionaries on special subjects and new,

improved encyclopedias have all enabled the reference librarian to seek out more specific kinds of information. In addition, new conventional and non-conventional aids for storage, analysis, and retrieval of recorded information have been introduced.[15]

One frequently heard complaint is that while there has been a marked improvement in technology and reference tools in the library, there has been no corresponding general improvement in the quality of reference and information services that libraries give clientele.[16] What is needed are new goals, new standards, and a new order of expectations in the area of an information delivery system designed to meet client needs.[17] Reference librarians must be educated to know the difference between recorded data and useful information and to understand that the objective of information service must be to transform the former into the latter.[18]

If the first step toward improved reference service is the designation of goals and standards, then the future of reference service holds promise. In 1976 the Standards Committee of the A.I.A.'s Reference and Adult Services Division published "A Commitment to Information Services," the first working document which approximates standards of service for reference librarians.[19] These standards reflect basic trends in library service, stating the need for cooperation at local, regional, state, and national levels and the need for communications equipment for better reference service.[20] It is also stated that "reference or information services are to be developed not only to meet user needs and to improve present services but to anticipate user needs and demands.[21]

Research is being done to determine user needs. Examples include Warner, Murray, and Painter's Information Needs of Urban Residents[22] and Zweizig's Predicting the Amount of Library Use. A Study in the Role of the Public Library in the Life of the Adult Public.[23] The new reference standards note that "provision is to be made for continuous feedback from users concerning their satisfaction with services and success in locating information."[24] The proceedings of 1973 NCLIS sponsored conference, entitled Library and Information Service Needs of the Nation, describe a variety of groups, such as rural users and the aged, and specifies different user needs.

What about the non-user? Where does he or she go for information? A study by Marianne F. Hamilton on community information centers may lend insight into this problem. In this study the reluctance of low-income and immigrant groups to use the library is noted. These people may turn to neighborhood information centers with their information needs, which include: human rights, employment, income, housing and accomodation, immigration and citizenship, health, education and training, social welfare of the aged, consumer protection, and recreation and travel.[25]

What are the societal trends that will have an impact on the information needs of the general public in the future? Some trends include:[26]

1. The increase of both married and unmarried women in the labor force.

2. The population increase in the age group 65 years and older.

3. The decrease in the last fifteen years of people aged 5-17.

4. The increase in female headed families, up fifty percent from 1960 to 1974.

5. The increase in both marriages and divorces.

6. The slowdown in enrollment in higher education.

7. The higher levels of unemployment in the 1970's compared to the 1960's.

These trends mean that the public library should be increasingly responsive to the needs of the aged and to the changing roles of women. Because enrollment in universities is decreasing, the public library's role as educator takes on an even more important position. The library should also stress vocational information in helping people become trained for employment.

A look at some of the reference services now being provided will help us to better judge reference service in the future. Experiments and programs are being implemented in public libraries throughout the country, and while the value of the services provided by many of these experiments and programs has not yet been determined, they do enable us to have a valuable indication of what might later transpire:

1. Job Services

In New York two libraries have set up job information centers for the growing pool of unemployed Americans.[27] Hempstead Public Library serves as a job clearinghouse for Nassau County residents, and Buffalo and Erie County Public Library run employment forums and publish pamphlets on:

a. employment for the handicapped

b. illegal job discrimination because of sex and age

c. job banks

In Philadelphia the Free Library and School District of Philadelphia have cosponsored an automated data base containing information about 400 occupations. The information is designed to help students choose careers based on interests, abilities, and educational goals. Three terminals, one in the central library and two in branch libraries, serve as access points to data banks.

2. Business Information

Milwaukee Public Library has instituted a Business Information Service to help meet the demands of the business community.[28] As well as more actively using old reference tools, they are buying many new, useful tools. Milwaukee Public Library provides business with:

a. a free library card for companies in Milwaukee County, for withdrawal of business-related materials

b. a charge account for copy services

c. consultation and research

d. library orientation talks and tours for business groups

3. Information for Women

The Women's History Research Center has devised a National Women's History Resource Data Bank which is a computer based reference service referral to existing institutions.[29] The information promotes women's programs and has research on issues affecting women. They have also published much of their material on microfilm, such as "Women and Health - Mental Health" and "Women and the Law."

4. On Line Reference Retrieval

Four California public libraries were picked in 1974 to

participate in a two year program to "probe the utility of the public library as a linking agent between the public and machine readable data bases. For the first year the project was entirely funded and anyone could have a search run free of charge."[30] The effects of the first year were new library customers, increased workload, heightened visibility of the library, and increased demands on the librarian to better comprehend questions in order to find search terms.

The average user in this experiment was highly educated. (Eighty percent were college graduates and forty percent had advanced degrees.) The data base was from Lockheed and may have lent itself to more technical questions but was still equipped to answer such questions as "What are the effects of cocaine on human beings? or "What are the effects of hyperactive children on family relations?"

During the second year of the experiment the patron was required to pay half the cost of the search. Unfortunately, the results of this part of the study are not yet available.

Minneapolis Public Library now has an INFORM program, where for $25 the library provides a complete answer to the client's question in whatever form he or she wants.[31] These two examples bring out an obvious conflict in reference service: While libraries claim that their goal is to meet the needs of all people, are not much of the technological advances being used to address the needs of a select, educated group? While the mechanisms are available to provide vital information to all people, will this in fact be implemented? Should people have to pay for information?

The biggest problem in determining the future of reference service is that no one is sure how far technology will go in

affecting reference service. Some talk about cable TV's in every home, providing two-way communication. Others talk of a mini-computer in the home that will provide the user with direct access to a data base. Others see a move back toward traditional reference service due to a severe disappointment with the limitations of computers.[32]

Despite any changes in user needs or mechanisms to respond to these needs, a basic model for dealing with reference questions will still be utilized. One method, referred to as "the reference process" in Bunge's "Reference Service in the Information Network" includes the following: 1) the "reference interview" - a dialogue between the librarian and the questioner to get a clear statement of the user's request and to gather facts and clues to amplify or refine this statement: 2) the translation phase - where the question is transformed into the technical and formal terms of the information system: 3) the formulation of a search strategy: 4) the search: 5) an assessment of the relevance of the information to the requester's needs.[33]

The future of reference service depends heavily on the quality of the reference librarian. Increasing awareness of this fact gives a hope for better training for the reference librarian. Not only will the reference librarian know where to go for information and how to present the information, but he or she will have a much stronger understanding of the process of human communication. The reference librarian will be sensitive to all kinds of people and help them to express their needs comfortably.

The awareness of the urgency of anticipating and understanding client needs allows one to assume that much more research in this area will be done. Many of the existing services for such groups as the aged, disadvantaged, and physically handicapped show a serious intent to meet the needs of all segments of the population. Depending on a specific user's needs, the appropriate method to fulfill this need will be employed.

This point brings up a major area of concern that should be discussed. A growing trend in library concerns is to provide vital or "coping" information. This paper has stressed the idea of providing information to all segments of the population and understanding the needs of the non-user as well as the user. However, there are many social service agencies that are specifically designed to serve many of these "coping" needs. The library's function in terms of vital information will be two-fold: 1) the library will produce materials, such as pamphlets, show films, have forums, and have collections on topics of vital importance; 2) the library will have an information and referral (I&R) service whereby the person with a need or problem is linked with a service which can meet the need or problem.[34] The librarian's ability to understand the problem and knowledge of the vast resources that will address the problem are as important here as when the librarian is asked a question of a technical nature.

While there is a strong move toward providing the kinds of information needs that Hamilton's study described, it must not be forgotten that the largest group of library reference users

are students.[35] The reference librarian's attitude toward students is mixed - "some are eager and anxious to help the students but recognize that in so doing, they may be limiting service to other groups. Some look upon the student as a headache or at best someone to put up with ..."[36]

If future reference service means communicating with and helping all segments of the population, this attitude will have to change. In fact, the library should have a close contact with the schools in order to be better prepared to help students with their information needs. The library must not get so involved with "coping" information needs that they neglect other kinds of reference questions posed by students and adults.

After a careful study of the major needs of the community that the public library serves, many resources will be available at the local level. Files will be kept on topics that reference librarians are frequently asked about, such as political issues, or materials on health or local history and personalities. Many requests will not entail extensive searching on the part of the reference librarian: he or she may quickly look up a question of a historical or statistical nature in the existing traditional library tools. As noted, I&R services will be present for questions that an agency other than the library is more equipped to handle. When the existing materials at the library do not meet the user's need, provision of these resources will reach the user at the local level. The Illinois North Suburban Library System has the sort of program that may well become prevalent in the future. Here, when the librarian has a request that he or she

cannot answer, an information request form is sent to the System Reference Service, where skilled reference librarians answer the question. With a national network system, if a regional or state librarian did not have the resources available, he or she would interact with the rest of the system to find the answer. Decreased equipment costs, in conjunction with the financial base of a network, would eventually permit computer terminals to be available in all public libraries. A network could subscribe to a variety of data bases, enabling the user to have access to desired information on the local level.

This discussion of reference service predicts future change as a matter of degree rather than kind. Certainly many libraries already offer I&R services, keep files on topics of great interest in the community, and are part of a library system. The future promises that many existing services will be improved and become a working reality for all libraries.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Edwin B. Parker, "Information and Society," in Library and Information Service Needs of the Nation (Washington D.C., 1974), p. 18.

[2]U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1975 (96th edition) (Washington D.C., 1975), p. 359.

[3]Parker, p. 17.

[4]Ibid., p. 18.

[5]Ibid., P. 15.

[6]Ibid., p. 14.

[7]Louis Vagionos, "Today is Tomorrow: A Look at the Future Information Arena," Library Journal (January 1, 1976), p. 149.

[8]Ibid., p. 727.

[9]Winifred B. Linderman, The Present Status and Future Prospects of Reference Service (Chicago, 1967) p. 175-176.

[10]Joseph Becker, "Information Network Prospects in the United States," Library Trends 17 (1969), p. 306.

[11]NCLIS, Toward a National Program for Library and Information Services: Goals for Action (Washington D.C., 1975).

[12]Ibid.

[13]Thomas J. Galvin, "The Education of the New Reference Librarian," Library Journal (April 15, 1975), P. 728.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid., p. 729.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid., p. 728.

[19]Bernard Vavrek, "Bless You Samuel Green! A Description of RASD's New Information Service Guidelines," Library Journal (April 15, 1976), p. 972.

[20]Standards Committee, Reference and Adult Services Division, American Library Association, "A Committment to Information Services," Library Journal (April 15, 1976), p. 974.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Edward Warner, Ann Murray, and Vernon Painter, Information Needs of Urban Residents (Washington D.C., 1973).

[23]Douglas Zweizig, Predicting the Amount of Library Use, A Study of the Role of the Public Library in the Life of the Adult Public, Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, Syracuse University, 1972.

[24]"Standards for Reference Services in Public Libraries." Library Association Record 72 (1970), p. 55.

[25]Marianne P. Hamilton, "Resources for Community Information Centers," Ontario Library Review, (December, 1974), p. 230.

[26]Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1975.

[27]"Job Services and Info Centers Run by Libraries," Library Journal (May 15, 1976), p. 1174.

[28]Elizabeth M. Walkey, "The Making of a Business Information Service," Wisconsin Library Bulletin (May-June 1975), p. 127.

[29]Women's Historical Research Center, "The Annotated Revolution or, Footnotes to the Revolution," California Librarian (January, 1976), p. 29.

[30]R.K. Summitt and O. Firschein, "On Line Reference Retrieval in a Public Library," Special Libraries (February, 1976), p. 92.

[31]Waters, p. 15.

[32]P. Kaegbein, "Libraries as Special Information Systems," INSPEL 11 no.1 (May 15, 1976), p. 13.

[33]Charles Bunge, "Reference Service in the Information Network," in Interlibrary Communications and Information Networks, ed. by Joseph Becker (Chicago, 1971), p. 109-110.

[34]Carolyn Luck, "Staff Training for the Information Center," DrexelLibrary Quarterly (January-April, 1976), p. 69.

[35]William A Katz, Introduction to Reference Work vol. 11 (New York, 1969, 1974), p. 38.

[36]Ibid.

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